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ABSTRACT

A topical analysis of the dialogue journals written by seven of one university faculty member's students of English as a foreign language (EFL) is presented. Examination of the first ten entries in the journals revealed five general topic categories: academic, personal, cultural, interpersonal, and general interest. The ten samples are provided. It is concluded that no clear pattern of topic exists in the samples, probably because the journals are a personal, individual activity that students use to meet individual needs. One fact noted was that the students with the highest percentage of personal topics were not only Latin Americans but also the only graduate students of the sample. Further research in the measurable benefits of the use of dialogue journals is recommended. A chart of topic frequency is appended. (MSE)

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Christine Meloni

WHAT DO UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT IN DIALOGUE JOURNALS?*

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In the preceding article, Kreeft suggests dialogue journal writing as a way in which "to create a learner-centered environment for language learning." It is this strong emphasis on the learner that appeals to me most.

I have enjoyed keeping dialogue journals with my EFL students at George Washington University for several semesters. I have learned a great deal about my students that I would not have learned otherwise. One reason is that this activity increases tremendously the amount of time spent individually with each student. Also many students feel more secure when writing confidentially than when speaking in class.

It has been interesting to see the ways in which my students use their journals to express themselves freely. I am particularly interested in discovering the problems and concerns they want to communicate to me.

I have begun a topical analysis of their dialogue journals. In my study I am looking at the following questions:

(1) What do students write about when given this unique opportunity to write freely on any topic? (2) How can these topics be categorized? (3) Do topics from certain categories appear more frequently than others? (4) Are there differences in the nature of topics among various groups (i.e. male-female, geographical area, level of English language proficiency, major field, and age)?

* This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Fourth Annual WATESOL Convention, 1983.

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Subjects

I have begun my study with a preliminary analysis of the dialogue journals of seven male students, all engineering majors enrolled in EFL 50, an advanced composition course equivalent to freshman composition for native speakers of English. The subjects are from Lebanon, Morocco, Korea, Malaysia, Cyprus, El Salvador, and Mexico.

Data

The topics in the first ten entries of the seven journals have been analyzed and categorized. The following broad categories have been established based on the data. These categories will undoubtedly need to be refined further as the study proceeds.

Topic Categories

- (1) Academic - topics related to student's present and past academic life.
- (2) Personal - topics related to student's own life such as family, hobbies, sports, profession, individual problems
- (3) Cultural - topics related to student's native culture or to U.S. culture.
- (4) Inter-personal - topics related to student's present and past academic life.
- (5) General - topics of interest to student but not directly related to him/her.

Sample Topic Entries

In order to illustrate the meaning of each category and to give the reader a glimpse into the journals, sample topic entries are given below. (These samples have not been corrected in any way.)

Sample I

Nationality: El Salvadoran

Category: Academic

In this opportunity I would like to tell you something about my first experiences with the MIDTERMS in GWU. In some courses the exams are according to the material that has been developed in

class, but in other courses the exams demands more attention by part of the students since they are oriented to survey the capabilities for interpretation of each student. This last kind of exams are very difficult and sometimes the results are not so good as student hopes to get. Any way, I believe that the learning is always well served and this type of exams as many other tools designed to measure the progress of pupils are well designed and oriented.

Sample II

Nationality: Mexican
Category: Academic

I'm going to change the subject. I'm happy because I have started the information research for my thesis. It is fascinating! The purpose of my thesis is to design a kind of program for the best use of Mexican energy resources in order to ready the development (not development in the normal sense, but an increase in the quality of life of the Mexican population) of the country.

It has been resulting very hard to find some information, but I am learning very much about my own country.

Sample III

Nationality: Lebanese
Category: Personal

At the end of June, I going back to Lebanon to spend my summer vacation. Lebanon is a very beautiful country, especially in summer time.

The first thing I'm going to do is to stay with my mom about one month, then to go with my brother Elie to the mountains for hunting. We have a small house built on a hill, from where we could see the shore, Beirut and Juniyah. So we could spend at least 7 days, and then go back home, where I could meet my friends and have fun. We have many things to do near the sea. We could dive, swim, or go fishing. But at the end of August, I'm going to leave Lebanon and come back to G.W. to continue my studies. So I wish that my plans and my dreams will come true.

Sample IV

Nationality: Malaysian
Category: Personal

Living in a country far from home is not easy for me and for everybody. We have to take care of our self. For me, I live on the 12th Street, that place is a quite dangerous place. I never get out of my house during the night. I came here to study and to get some experience. Besides being a "book worm" we also must take care of our health and not always eat junk food. I come here also to enjoy my self.

Sample V

Nationality: Lebanese
Category: Cultural

In Lebanon, the symbol on our National Flag has a cedar inside.

In Lebanon, we had several massacres and wars since (400 B.C.) in (1840 - 1860 - 1958). The red color shows the blood of the Lebanese people while defending their homes. The white color shows the color of their heart. The people of Lebanon have never hated anybody (enemy or not). I'm talking about real Lebanese. The cedar is our symbol which show more than one thing because the mountains were the natural refuge for the Lebanese, so we've put the cedar symbol because there are many cedars there.

Sample VI

Nationality: Cypriot
Category: Cultural

Now going back to the generation gap in my country, I'd like to say that younger generation has more extreme ideas than the older's. By this I mean that the new generation after it saw all the mistakes made by the older generation and having in mind what's happening today, can get decision which may help in finding solutions in the political problem. It's true that young Cypriot people are very active politically and sometimes are very fanatic. But I believe that they have good reason to be like this.

Sample VII

Nationality: Moroccan
Category: Cultural

Moroccan people are mediterranean, so we have strong communications between us. As all mediterranean do, we talk with "the hands" and very loud and the speech comes directly from the heart. Our communication is more based on feelings than formalities, and we are not afraid of socializing. Respect is very important for a good communication with Moroccan even if the relationship is informal.

Sample VIII

Nationality: Korean
Category: Interpersonal

I want to make American friends, but I have no time. I spend most of time in library about 9-10 hours every day. So I have no time to spend with American student or foreign student. Especially, this is the first semester which I take my major field, so I spent all the time to study my major.

Sample IX

Nationality: Moroccan
Category: Interpersonal

I have many American friends but just two of them are very good friend. Many Americans are astonished when they see that Moroccan people are not as they think. ... it is hard to imagine that I can listen to very good music and know a lot of things in many areas. After "passing" the first test, they start reviewing their point of view about me. But, after, they have my test to see if they are an open mind people.

Sample X

Nationality: Cypriot
Category: General

One of the most disturbing phenomena of the 20th century were U.F.O. There are so many theories which are talking about them, but none is completely right. Scientists are still trying to identify those objects in order to give a solution on the mystery. Characteristic of these objects is their shape, which appears to be different each time. In addition they appear very strange shape - given the impression of high technological machines made of human beings on 20th century. According to Soviet scientist when they come on Earth their purpose is to explore planets, as we did going to Venus and moon. If their purpose is to make friends on Earth, it will be their best achievement ever did because they choose right place and right beings. People on Earth need also friends from other planets or other solar systems.

Results of Analysis

When we look at the results given in Table I, no clear pattern seems to emerge yet and perhaps never will. Dialogue journal writing is a very personal, individual activity and perhaps we do not want to find patterns. Students will use the dialogue journals in different ways to meet their individual needs.

(See Table, pg. 20)

All of the subjects share three characteristics: they are (1) male, (2) enrolled in EFL 50, and (3) majoring in engineering. On the basis of these data, however, we cannot make any generalizations about males, about students at this level of English language proficiency, or about engineering students.

It is interesting to note that the students with the highest percentage of personal topics were both Latin Americans. They were also the only graduate students. These might indicate patterns, but more data are needed

to establish them.

Conclusions

It is clear that a great deal of research still needs to be carried out in this area of topical analysis and in several other areas related to dialogue journal writing. I feel, however, along with my friends and colleagues Kreeft and Gutstein, who are also currently involved in dialogue journal research, that it is important to begin to go beyond the instinctive reactions of the teachers who are using dialogue journals in their classrooms and to document the benefits of this activity in a more precise way. This paper is a step in this direction.

TABLE I: Number and Percentage of Topics per Category.

NATIONALITY	ACADEMIC	PERSONAL	CULTURAL	INTER-PER	GENERAL	TOTAL
Lebanon	2 (15%)	4 (31%)	3 (25%)	4 (31%)	0 (0%)	13
Morocco	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	6 (38%)	4 (25%)	4 (25%)	16
Korea	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)	7 (70%)	10
Malaysia	10 (37%)	9 (33%)	6 (22%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)	27
Cyprus	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	4 (33%)	12
El Salvador	4 (29%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)	14
Mexico	11 (55%)	8 (40%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20
Total	28 (25%)	29 (26%)	25 (22%)	14 (13%)	16 (14%)	112